

Graffiti Crews' Potential Pedagogical Role

Konstantinos Avramidis

National Technical University of Athens, Athens, Greece

and

Konstantina Drakopoulou

University of Athens, Athens, Greece

Abstract

Since the '60s New York style graffiti has gradually become an integral part of the urban visual landscape all over the world. The -so called- graffiti scene evolved into an alternative space where writers educate one another. Through their association with other writers, especially through their membership in informal organized groups known as "crews", adolescents become aware, and thus critical, of their education situation. Although originally organized to support painting and dispense technical skills, over the years crews became complex social and educational arenas. In this article we examine the formation, structure and function of the crews so as to address their educational potentials. We argue that graffiti writers through their participation in crews and active engagement in graffiti practice absorb many important values to build self-confidence and to success in a mainstream career, since they learn to seek originality, work hard to improve, manage space as well as time, collaborate with each other in a competitive environment, and so on. Perhaps graffiti's most significant educational contribution is that, unlike most schools or other cultural institutions, encourage writers to think critically and involves them in the construction of alternatives.

Keywords: critical attitude, crews, education, graffiti.

Introduction

New York style graffiti appeared in the late '60s on the walls, billboards, subway cars and in the tunnels of public spaces. Although it is important not to romanticize youth cultures we should reconsider questions of pedagogy in relation to art practice, art theory and art education within a broader sociopolitical frame. This potentially revolutionary performance has since evolved into an alternative space and into a new form of sociability, allowing adolescents in cities and even in rural locations to educate themselves outside dominant educational institutions, and to inject one's voice, creativity, or beliefs into the domain of the public's eye. For the first time, a generation of young people became part of an empowering network and had the freedom to control their own education and career outside of schools. The desire to communicate and to work with peers caused them to develop skills and knowledge relevant to their everyday lives. This sense of community resulted in an alternative, collaborative process of education. According to Nicolas Bourriaud (2002:28) all these types of collaboration represent today fully-fledged artistic "forms" and aesthetic objects that mean something other than a simple aesthetic consumption in mind. Additionally, Peter McLaren (2000:187) believes that such revolutionary

activities play important role in constructing “sites-provisional sites-in which new structured mobilities and tendential lines of forces can be made to suture identity to the larger problematic of social justice” This self-directed learning gives the graffiti writers the opportunity to become aware of their social position, to experience a different way of life freed from cultural power relations, and to get a taste of communal freedom. The writers’ training entails a series of structured stages developed within the *crews* – informal groups organized by the “writers” for companionship, collaboration and support.

As an element of the hip-hop culture, graffiti reached Greece in the end of the '80s. Greek writers are not motivated by a desire to rebel against social injustices¹ or a need to escape social margins. Still, they are able to construct individual identities through graffiti’s pedagogical potential, amounting to the ability of leading a self-determined and creative life. Additionally, graffiti-based activities performed in the much-maligned big city neighborhoods challenge accepted norms, engage urban teens more directly in their communities and contribute to the development of community identity.

New York style graffiti embraces the contradiction of a desire for a common youth culture while maintaining autonomy. According to Bruffee (1995:116), any learning community consists of certain issues that interact with each other: “Intellectual indebtedness, shared expertise, technical knowledge and tradition, patterns of approval and reward, levels of collaboration, conflict and competition”. By adopting this framework we can move forward to structure an analysis of the graffiti community in terms of its pedagogical role. Focusing mainly on crews, as the dominant example of graffiti group formation within which pedagogy takes place, the aim of this paper is to identify how these issues are addressed. By pointing out how crews are defined and formed, how they are structured and operate, our ulterior aim is to highlight their potential pedagogical role.

Crew Definition and Formation: Importance and objectives

Let us start by pointing out that every public form of writing is not graffiti. There is a difference between slogans, murals and graffiti. What makes the difference is not the means or the aesthetics of the pictures. It is neither the topics but the intention of the agents. The definition of graffiti lies in the nature of *intentions*. Faith in those intentions (Mailer et al, 1974), meaning the construction of a structure which determines behavior and attitude, goals and strategies, praise and disapproval is what drives us to regard it as *subculture*². It is a subculture though that does not consume

¹ New York style graffiti is not politicized. Rebel against social injustices characterizes another type of graffiti, known as “political graffiti”, which is produced by different people and for different purposes. More on political graffiti in Greece:

Avramidis K. (2012) "Live your Greece in myths': Reading the crisis on Athens' walls" in Brighenti A.M. (ed.) *Regards on crisis in Europe*. Professional Dreamers, Trento.

Tsilimpounidi, M., Walsh, A. (2010) "Painting human rights: Mapping street art in Athens" in *Journal of Arts and Communities* 2: 2, pp. 111-122.

² It is important to distinguish between “counterculture” and “subculture”. Both counterculture and subculture can be described as groups whose behavior deviates from the societal norm. Counterculture can be distinguished from subculture based on the level of *political opposition*. Graffiti is frequently cited as subculture by scholars (Lachmann, 1989; McDonald, 2001; Austin, 2001; Christen, 2003).

time dressing agents³ that become active in it but that dress their virtual identities: it is a non-spectacular subculture, a subculture as a *career* (Lachmann, 1989).

But what is a crew in the first place? As Nancy McDonald cites, a crew is “a group of likeminded writers who band together under a single name to form a union” (McDonald, 2001:112). Further, what makes it special and why is it so important? In the beginning writing was practiced by kids who were by-and-large doing graffiti primarily as “loners”. But, as the number of writers grew, it became difficult for a single individual to gain fame. It was already obvious that collaboration was the only way for success since graffiti writers are devoted fame hunters. As the group grows larger and more people write the name, the group stands a chance of becoming famous, bringing status to all of its members⁴ (Castleman, 1982:112). Moreover, when graffiti styles became more sophisticated, an exchange of knowledge and technique turned out to be essential. Likewise, the illegal nature of such an activity underlined the necessity for alliance (e.g. lookouts etc.). Thereby, as the graffiti movement grew writers began to organize into writing groups or graffiti clubs and as Jeff Ferrell affirms “they were increasingly organizing themselves into writers’ crews—groups of writers who collaboratively designed and painted the elaborate pieces for which hip hop graffiti was now known” (Ferrell, 1996:8). At first they practiced their graffiti with a friend or a small group of friends. These writing groups remained relatively small, but the makeup of the group changed over periods of time (Stewart, 1989:186).

So, how and why were crews formed? At the basic level, crew members are committed to writing and to each other. Graffiti subculture is extremely *competitive*⁵ since fame is the fundamental goal of a writer’s career. Further, graffiti is a *sophisticated* as well as difficult practice due to its, in many cases, *illicit* nature. These three factors are the most fundamental reasons⁶ of crews’ formations. “If the subculture’s ‘competitive edge’ pushes writers to develop and hone their style”, Ferrell argues, “so does cooperation among them, as they learn new techniques and share stylistic innovations” (Ferrell, 1996:52). By piecing together or arguing about other writers’ completed pieces or even just exchanging ideas and techniques, writers

Many scholars, especially those who belong in the first generation of subcultural studies, believe that a subculture is formed to ‘solve problems’ for which dominant culture has not produced ‘solutions’ yet.

³ Like punks or mods, for example, who are frequently cited as agents of spectacular subcultures.

See also:

Hall S., Jefferson T. (1975), *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Postwar Britain*. Hutchinson, London.

Hebdige D.(1979) *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. Routledge, London.

⁴ Richard Lachmann describes writers’ efforts to win a greater measure of fame for themselves by forming ‘writing gangs’ or ‘crews’ in “an effort to get up a group, rather than personal, name over a wider territory”. (Lachmann, 1988:242)

⁵ The competitive nature of writing often breeds tension among the graffiti writers. The style wars are the lifeblood of the culture’s creative process. Some crews encourage friendly competition within the crew at early formative stages to raise the energy and standards of the group’s work as a whole (Grody, 2006: 218). Writers compete to determine who has the most innovative and original style and try to excel in relationship to a peer or rival.

⁶ Another reason that should be noted is the urge for urban youths to belong to a group. This ‘sense of belonging’ is of great importance for youths because they can taste the power of ‘group-membership’. According to Joe Austin “the sense of commitment between members is an attractive feature for some young people, for whom crews might serve an alternative family network of primary support” (Austin, 2001:120).

negotiate a shared sense of style at the same time they elaborate their own and “this cooperative development of individual and subcultural style goes within and between crews” (Ferrell, 1996:52). “A graffiti subculture -a “scene”, in the writers argot-began to emerge as writers started seeing each other’s work, meeting, and forming crews”, Ferrell cites (*ibid.*, 49). Writers’ crews are of great importance in this respect since they contributed to the scene’s development. As this scene grew, graffiti writing began to take on the many dimensions of collective activity. Crews can be small or large, illegal or legal, local or even international but “they all share a common purpose – support” (McDonald, 2001:112). As Joe Austin argues, “crews serve important arenas of information exchange and sources of assistance with writing problems, such as acquiring paint, working out the color schemes for a masterpiece, or planning a hit on a risky location” (Austin, 2001:64).

Crew Structure: Roles and characteristics

This new organizational form emerged relatively early due to graffiti’s self-centered nature. But what are its characteristics? Crews developed as a kind of a “social hybrid”, “combining the informal organization of a peer group, the shared-goal orientation of sports team, and the collective identity and protective functions of gang” (Austin, 2001:64). But, unlike the writing gangs⁷, these groups are rather informal⁸ in structure and are “not formed for the sake of defense against fighting gangs but only for companionship and occasional joint writing ventures” (Castleman, 1982:107). Crews form in a number of ways. Most consist of writers of about the same level⁹ of skill who meet in school or in their neighborhood¹⁰ (Castleman, 1982:110). The writers will often put the name¹¹ of their crew after, or sometimes instead of, their own¹². Members that constitute such a group are coherent; they mutual respect and trust each other¹³. Crew members also tend to paint together, and

⁷ According to Susan Phillips, “hip-hop graffiti and gang graffiti differ at a few basic levels. First, hip-hop graffiti has few territorial or neighborhood correlates. Despite some geographical and social links, gang members and taggers are different people; gangs and crews are entirely different entities. Crew members may act like gang members in that they are sometimes violent towards one another. But they are not driven by the context of protecting neighborhood space or themselves through the development of a reputation. Their goals always relate to their act: achieving fame and reputation for themselves and their crew through graffiti production. Crews are about graffiti, plain and simple. Further, a single writer can belong to several crews, whereas membership in a gang is usually individual and lifelong” (Phillips, 1999:312). It is important here to note that gangs or other similar groups do not exist in Greece.

⁸ Writers began to organize more informal groups or crews, not for protection, but for companionship, collaboration, and support. The first crews were master groups of highly skilled and experienced writers (Christen, 2003)

⁹ Susan Phillips believes that crews consisted on concentrated groups of graffiti writers at varying levels of proficiency. She also argues that writers who just starting out would enter into apprentice-type relationships with more mature writers, learning the tricks of the trade from the masters (Phillips, 1999:312), but, while this is actually true, it does not take place within crews.

¹⁰ According to Jack Stewart some of the groups were formed along racial lines (Stewart, 1989:187).

¹¹ While graffiti writers tend to use names or words as ‘tags’, when it comes in terms of the crew name they usually prefer initials. According to Joe Austin, “a crew’s name is most often made visible, established, and remembered as initials rather than words” (Austin, 2001:121).

¹² Crew members write the crew’s initials alongside their own names, although, according to Joe Austin “in most works the crew’s name does not challenge the centrality of the individuals writer’s name” (Austin, 2001:120).

¹³ Crews are collaborative at their base, with skill development as their foundation. Many writers hang out at each other’s homes, working on sketches or painting a backyard wall, developing color schemes, letter styles and character images during their early development. Inter-crew collaborations may involve crews from the same city, different cities in the country, or international collaborations. The most prominent writers may actually do informal “tours” to various cities and countries around the world, staying in other writer’s homes while in town, and often working on a mix of permission and non-permission projects. The writers usually share an interest in the ritualistic process of responding to a space and feeling part of their environment.

as McDonald remarks: “when you find yourself in enemy territory, trustworthy accomplices are all-important” (McDonald, 2001:112). Going out to bomb in groups provides these writers with companionship, help and extra hands. Moreover, crews provide a great deal of fame to their members. Further, crew members often share a common ideology about graffiti practice and they agree up to a certain “protocol” of writing, meaning certain graffiti ‘code of behavior’.

Which is the role each member is expected or ought to play within a crew? Though informal, crews assign special *hierarchical roles* to their members since a writer committed to the craft has to master a wide range of specialized knowledge (e.g. characters, background design, lettering and so on). Further, as Janice Rahn reminds us, graffiti culture, despite its focus on individual expression, assigns writers to hierarchical roles similar to those in workspace (Rahn, 2002:150). Portion of the work are doled out according to the skill and status of the writers (Castleman, 1982:109), since the reputation of the crew depends on the reputation of its individual members as much as on their collective reputation as a group, and so a productive member reflects well on a crew. “The two are mutually reinforcing” (Austin, 2001:120). Beginners may serve as lookouts, particularly while more experienced writers executing works in places where they might be caught or they provide assistance to more complex and sophisticated pieces. In other words, a more experienced writer teaches a less experienced while the latter provides help and new ideas. Within a crew writers are more or less of the same proficiency and they exchange with each other a special knowledge acquired one way or another. These are common forms of mutual support not only in beginners’ groups but also to master crews as well. Beginners’ groups -or “toys” crews-, for example, consist of inexperienced writers who decide to work jointly toward developing their writing techniques and building their reputation¹⁴. Within such groups, novices collaborate towards common goals: evolve and build reputation. For writers who wish to start a group, coming up with a good name for it is of primary importance¹⁵ (Castleman, 1982:112). Though, the most admired graffiti groups are the master groups that consist of only highly skilled and experienced writers. Even within these groups, master writers exchange highly sophisticated tricks and evaluate each others’ work and progress. Moreover, even master writers may have partial specialized knowledge (e.g. lettering, characters etc) and so they collaborate in order to execute complex masterpieces¹⁶.

¹⁴ According to Craig Castleman, “most toys get their start by joining open-membership groups that usually consist of skilled master artists who manage a large group of student writers. The leaders of such groups benefit by acquiring willing workers who assist them in their writing. The membership of such groups change constantly as new writers join and others, having become skilled writers in their own right, form their own groups” (Castleman, 1982:110).

¹⁵ The crew name, as well as writers’ name, is crucial since it presents its members. Crew names are mainly consisted of initials. Some of them unveil information about their members (e.g. neighborhood, special dates etc.) while others attempt to sound aggressive or artistic etc. A good example of a crew name that combines both is that of the SGB, a well-known Greek crew from Thessaloniki. These initials of the Skra Ghetto Boys reveal not only information, since Skra is the main square of their neighborhood, but also dress its members with a mantle of aggressiveness (Ghetto) and masculinity (Boys). To attract attention, a newly forming crew spends a great deal of time designing a unique name, much as the individual writer does.

¹⁶ A master crew may also be consisted explicitly of illicit writers. The goal for such hardcore crews is to ‘get up’ as much as possible. A good example is the Greek based crew of STB (Subterranean Bombers) which is mainly consisted of experienced, yet illegal, writers. It is also common for master crews to recruit young bombers, since ‘older’ writers tend to execute more legal works.

Crew function: Knowledge exchange, axiological models and the educational process

A crew operates in much the same way as a real family does; prepares each member to confront the difficulties and opportunities of society, in this case graffiti scene. It is formed as a safe sphere of valuation and at the same time spreads the axiological premises that shape graffiti world. And as Ferrell states “when writers piece, as when they tag, other writers make up their primary audience [...] they can be sure that it will be seen and evaluated by members of the subculture” (Ferrell, 1996:51). This perpetual evaluation defines the axiological model that depends upon the “exercise of taste” (Stewart, 1987:163). Personal signatures of an individual style¹⁷, designed to be read by a particular *audience* in particular ways. Within crews, individuals win, for the first time, personal confirmation of their fame since the other crew members operate as their primary audience. Therefore, crew members become aware of how graffiti is evaluated and fame is conferred by audiences, since the tag’s value is derived from the social relations within which it is created” (Lachmann, 1988:240). The recognition by its peers is a crucial motivator of illegal tagging and piecing for all the participants. To earn the respect of one’s peers is a powerful motivator to improve one’s techniques and to take personal risk in any community. Stardom status is awarded to those who invented styles, took risks, or somehow earned a name in the history of graffiti. Fame is a powerful motivator for the vast majority of writers, while others who like to keep their obsession private are critical of those who strive for widespread notoriety.

Some crews define borders between acceptable and unacceptable mode of conduct. They adopt a specific attitude towards some principles or unwritten rules of graffiti practice. For example, one of the principles of the graffiti writer’s ethical code is that a writer cannot copy -or “bite”¹⁸- either the tag or the style of another writer. Further, crews adopt a certain behavior concerning erasure -or ‘cross’- of their pieces by others, since they engage, or not, to unconventional graffiti wars. The reputation of the writer depends upon the recognizability of his or her style (Stewart, 1987:164). The new emphasis on style prompts writers to cluster in groups, constructing, according Richard Lachmann. “a total art world” for discussing new designs, devising aesthetic standards, and judging innovations (Lachmann, 1988:247). Members support each other by sharing ideas, collaborating on pieces, serving as lookouts; but they also *battle each other* in order to push most to higher levels of creativity and achievement (Christen, 2003:60).

Graffiti community is structured by an explicit hierarchy: beginners -called toys- work with master writers -called kings- as apprentices (Stewart, 1987:163). Those who write graffiti for more than a few months typically go through a series of structured stages similar to those of mainstream careers. The young writers usually

¹⁷ According to Susan Stewart, since writing graffiti is illegal and quite specifically dangerous, “the aesthetic criteria at work in the writers’ schemes of evaluation are a matter of conception and execution more than a matter of judgments regarding the qualities of a final artifact - writers will often make evaluative comments part of their ‘pieces’, leaving a history of the constraints on their work: ‘sorry about the drips’, ‘it’s cold’, ‘cheap paint’, ‘too late, too tired’ etc” (Stewart, 1987:166).

¹⁸ As Richard Christen argues, early graffiti writers held originality in high regard and condemned *improper* borrowing or ‘bitting’. The key word here is ‘improper’ since there is a fine line between influence and biting. The latter is as unacceptable as plagiarism in academic terms. (Christen, 2003)

begin their apprenticeships by filling in the outlines of large graffiti works signed by master writers (Christen, 2003:65). Such work may not contribute to toys' own fame although does allow him or her to acquire technical and stylistic skills. Writing reproduced itself through this peer culture since the skills necessary for writing were not available elsewhere¹⁹. Most of this knowledge was acquired by the novice through occasional contact with more experienced writers, through observation and trial and error, or through direct instruction in a crew. As Richard Christen rightfully argues "the mentor-apprentice relationship is the primary way that young writers have learned their craft over the last decades" (Christen, 2003:65). Those without a mentor are at distinct disadvantage since they have to learn the "hard way", by trial and error. Studying with a respected master writer was "a good way to later become a respected master in one's own right" (Austin, 2001:171).

It is apparent that graffiti crews served as a writers' school²⁰. The most organized of these crews, resemble medieval guilds or the apprentice system of the Renaissance (Stewart, 1989:421; Christen, 2003:65). The guild operated a slow and servile apprenticeship system in which a boy could learn everything from color mixing to drawing and painting in a painter's workshop. He would eventually earn his certificate from a local company of painters, and be able to take up commissions in the area. The guilds organized the mechanical arts, while the court and nobility were the principal sponsors of the liberal arts. To reclassify painting from the mechanical arts to the liberal arts was to shift the emphasis of the work from a handcraft to a literary pursuit. Renaissance art theorists attempted to apply some kind of theory about poetry from the ancients to the art of painting, and to prove that painting and poetry are sister arts (*ut pictura poesis*).²¹ "Such a change would challenge the role of the guild and would involve far reaching social and practical consequences for the relation between artist and patron, and between art and society" (Salaman, 2008:9). The change happened within the context of the emerging art academy, within the practice of Renaissance humanism, with reference to the texts of the ancients. The idea to form an academy of art came from Giorgio Vasari, painter and writer of the *Lives of Artists (Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori italiani, da Cimabue insino a' tempi nostri*. Florence 1568). The *Accademia del Disegno* was set up in Florence in 1563 and it had two main goals: the first was to establish itself as a powerful and glamorous authority on art in order to celebrate its members and to break off from the guild. The second aim was the idea to teach the young. The academy's educational role was based on the belief that the artist needed access to knowledge and theory first and know-how second. This complex antagonism-intellectual or manual-has persistently presented itself from the emergence of the art academy in the sixteenth century to refutation of the academic tradition by the Bauhaus in the early 20th century.

Eventually without any knowledge of the way young Renaissance apprentices mastered their craft, the novices in graffiti experience a system of teaching by the

¹⁹ Crews' significance as informational arenas radically changed since internet became part of everyday life. Although, skills and technical information still play a significant role of the crew members' 'educational process'.

²⁰ Tales of learning from another writer or through participation in a crew are common when writers tell about their individual development.

²¹ *Ut pictura poesis* is famously alluded and endlessly referred to a quote from Horace. About the history of the art academies see also Pevsner N., (1940) *Academies of Art, Past and Present*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

masters. Immediately relevant are Nicholas Pevsner's comments on the academy system for training artists: "Perspective is the first subject to be taught. After this the student is to be introduced into the theory and practice of proportion, and then into drawing from his master's drawing and in the end to the practice of his art" (Pevsner, 1940:35). This latter remark conjures up a significant comparison between the way of teaching delivered at the academy class and that in the train yards. Both training activities are personal and internal, where internal alludes to the place of imagination, but communal and social as well. The academy classes did not encourage naturalistically copied objects; they rather led the students to draw from their imagination. The thinking part of drawing elevated drawing from a mechanical craft to the pursuit of creative writing. This way of teaching equated drawing to writing—both forms of thinking, both skilled and coded activities that fed off observation, memory and knowledge (Salaman, 2008:11). Similarly, the beginners in the graffiti scene work on sketches in their "black books"²². The alphabet provides a formal structure and imposes a discipline that can be developed through individual styles and increasing levels of complexity (Rahn, 2002: 204). Graffiti writers used to go through countless pages of paper trying to understand how to shape the lines, the perspectival space, the curves, the arrows and the color patterns. The drawing and the coloring of the letter forms have been based on the graffiti scene's tradition. Anyone serious enough to be really involved knows the names of the masters and the morphological characteristics of the various styles. In the process he or she works steadily to build upon them. There is an emphasis on mastery of technique that can be achieved within a structure of learning. All the writers possess the experience of doodling and writing the name. One progresses from one level to the next: designing a personal tag name, copying his or her master's style and progressing to the development of a distinctive style (Rahn, 2002:150). Graffiti writers set standards and mutually acknowledge a level of skills that have to be reached to merit the title of writer rather than the inferior toy. Writers demonstrate the traditional skills they learned during their earlier development (letter styles, color schemes, and representational elements), and proceed to show how they played with these standards to create their own style. They share and reinvent ideas in an effort to outdo previous work. This means that the beginners devote substantial time in private to progress from writing tags (simple signatures) to writing "throw ups" (larger tags) to masterpieces and figurative works on a variety of surfaces. The graffiti signs serve not only as a mark of individual existence but also as an attempt to change contemporary urban environment though the label of the personal. Thus, the individual and collective nature of graffiti manifest that private and public do not have to be polarities (Rahn, 2002:181).

Graffiti, provides a non-institutional structure for adolescents to learn from each other through a communication network. Graffiti writers prefer the process of learning within the informal system of mentoring within their community. Through the mentoring system, that raises the graffiti crews from mere associations of writers to educational organizations, aesthetic principles, cultural values, knowledge, technique, skills, and style are handed down from one generation to the next. The teaching and learning of painting techniques is the most obvious education taking place within crews. An experienced writer with a superior letter style creates the initial outlines, cuts out the letters at the edges, adds bits and flourishes in the letter faces and teaches

²² Black book is a writer's sketchbook used for personal artistic development, the collecting of other artists' work, and the planning for future "bombing" and "piecing". See also Felisbret E., (2008) *Graffiti-New York*. Abrams, New York.

color techniques like fading²³ and other visual principles of writing. The novices assist on works designed by masters, often painting backgrounds and filling in outlines in preparation for the finer detailed work. The members of a crew critique each other. Whether they are working on a piece or production jointly or side by side, openness of dialogue allows crew members to discuss how a color does or doesn't work, or advise on a letter connection. Writers look down on inferior craftsmanship such as bad can control leading to inconsistent lines and unintentional drips or lack of originality. Apart from the technical or aesthetic points the apprentices are also taught anything from gathering materials to "routes" (streets, areas, or buildings to be hit regularly) or yards, how to steal paint, how to evade the police and how to run tracks. Writers express gratitude toward their early mentors in "roll-calls"²⁴ that are placed around pieces, even years after that early schooling (Grody, 2007:244). As Austin points out, "crews became an institutionalized part of writing culture after 1973" (Austin, 2001:119). Since then, most writers from all around the globe have been "down" with one or more crews. Few crews require exclusivity from their members, so writers are often part of multiple crews.

However, some of the learning within crews is less obvious, for example, as Christen argues, "writers build and enforce their own rules and, in the process, learn an essential premise of democratic citizenship-that they have the right and responsibility to govern themselves" (Christen, 2003:67). Although originally organized to support painting of pieces, *pedagogy* has become one of their most important functions. Crews became *educational organizations*²⁵ that promote valuable learning among their members since experienced writers pass not only their knowledge and skills but also their values. For example, they learn how to collaborate since they have to organize together with other peers complex projects; although they live in a competitive community they learn how to reconcile the individualism with unity and commitment to their crew, how to resolve conflicts with spray cans rather than violence. They recognize that they are part of a culture with rules and boundaries and that therefore they have the responsibility to govern themselves. Apart from that democratic citizenship lesson they also know that, even for the most talented, the only way to achieve high levels of creativity and technical skills and to gain respect is the hard work and practice, the strict work ethic²⁶. All these are key ingredients to build self-confidence and important for success in a mainstream career.

Crews, initially, were the most institutionalized form for dispensing technical skills but over the years they became complex social and educational arenas. Many writers reject or are critical of schooling within educational institutions where learning is motivated by marks and university degrees and therefore value their self-

²³ Fading is a color technique developed on the subway cars. It takes advantage of the aerosolised pigments so that one hue becomes progressively fainter while blending smoothly into another color.

²⁴ Roll-calls or shout-outs are the names of crew members and respected writers who often were the mentors of the creators.

²⁵ According to Richard Christen, Lawrence Cremin defines education as "the liberate, systematic and sustained effort to transmit, evoke, or acquire knowledge, values, skills and sensibilities", all activities that clearly take place within a crew (Christen, 2003:65).

Cremin L., *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience, 1876-1980*, New York: Harper and Row, 1988, pp.x

²⁶ Nancy McDonald argues that the writers also receive negative gender lessons, imbedded in the culture's emphasis on physicality and in its demands for bravery (McDonald, 2001:94-150).

determination to act and learn outside the standardized controls of evaluative systems. It is well known that the ruling class in order to legitimate control must influence people to consent to their own oppression through a coordinated system; the educational system in particular serves a hegemonic role in naturalizing the status quo for those in power. Many writers began graffiti out of an adolescent attraction to the thrill of the experience but through this activity in public space they become politically engaged. They have understood that not everyone has the right to be represented in public space. Those who have the money to buy it and are compliant with dominant structures, such as advertising, can control it. Through the illegality of their performance the graffiti writers become gradually politically engaged and articulate critical concerns about the use and the sharing of public space: How can a democratic society condemn those who have no monetary means to claim their own space and to work toward changing their environment? Of special importance is also the fact that graffiti writers not only introduce a different sense of public space but also put forward a more interactive way of viewing. We are referring to abandoned areas, obsolete spaces and buildings that graffiti reinstates as spaces of freedom, as an alternative to lucrative reality prevailing in the late capitalist city. By doing so, writers transform urban walls into contested spaces, and as Harris argues, “contested spaces are necessary for a vibrant democracy” (Harris, 2006:101).

Richard Christen attempts an interesting comparison between crews' pedagogy and that of more acknowledged learning institutions such as schools and art societies. “Graffiti education”, Christen cites, “both parallel and diverge from the teaching of these traditional institutions, functioning paradoxically as both a status quo and transgressive organization” (Christen, 2003:58). Within crews, adolescents undergo an education process, replicating, to a certain degree, what is traditionally taught in schools: technical skills, democratic citizenship, collaboration within a competitive environment, creative thought, conflict and time management etc. Here, it is important to point out that graffiti, although considered subcultural, can be paralleled to traditional educational organization since it teaches adolescents to function within dominant structures and expectations. Ian Maxwell argues that graffiti and hip-hop ideology “conforms nicely to liberal, humanist ideals –individualism, free expression, brotherhood, and liberty- that have framed the dominant western ideologies since the Enlightenment”. He also posits that graffiti, like most subcultural youth scenes, is “fundamentally structured by, and recuperates at least some of the values and structures of the parent culture” (Maxwell, 1997:52). These observations are correct only to some extent since graffiti is inherently “transgressive” (Christen, 2003:71). As hierarchical as it may be itself, graffiti critically encounters traditional concepts of hierarchies. As an artistic-urban phenomenon, graffiti has a double role: an artistic and a political one. Even if graffiti's messages are not overtly political, the *act* of writing is. Perhaps graffiti's most significant educational contribution is that, unlike most schools or even families, “introduces writers to a *critical understanding* of power structures and involves them in the *construction of alternatives*” (*ibid.*, 71, italics added). Over time, Richard Christen argues, writers engage in a reform process that teaches and, to some extent, gives them elements of power needed to *transform their individual and collective lives* (*ibid.*, 73). Christen identifies three key components of such a *transformative praxis* (*ibid.*, 73-78). Control over *communication* is the first one. Over time writers become aware of the power of their medium and through this mediated participation become more aware of their, as Henri Lefebvre puts it, right to the city (Lefebvre, 1996:63). Building and learning the

values of inclusive communities on the behalf of writers is the second component. The third transformative lesson learned and practiced in the graffiti crews is that real *power lies within* rather outside their communities²⁷.

Historically, schools have operated as status-quo educational organizations, teaching students technical skills and values in order to be able to participate to the public sphere. On the other hand, cultural institutions have typically a complementary role, supporting schools in their efforts but preparing students for the private sphere. The writing crews have broken from the traditions of cultural institutions in a number of ways since, apart from the obvious differences, graffiti education extends far beyond the public sphere. By doing so, crews' objectives are more similar to those of schools than traditional cultural organizations, simply because crews prepare their 'students' to participate in the public sphere. The graffiti education, as Christen cites, "replicates much of what schools traditionally taught [...] given these similarities, it is not surprising that crews have often functioned as surrogate schools" (Christen, 2003:72). It could be assumed that crews might offer a better education than schools since 'students' are more effectively prepared to make a difference in the city, focusing on creativity and management²⁸.

The term "critical pedagogy" has traditionally referred to teaching and learning practices that are designed to raise learners' critical consciousness as a needed first step of "praxis", which is defined as the know-how to take constructive action. Since both critical understanding of power structures that is followed by the development of consciousness of freedom, and the construction of alternatives are elements of critical pedagogy philosophy of education, we can assume a posteriori that writers adopt this specific educational methodology. As Christen remarks, "writers impose a symbolic resistance that fosters a critique of power and opportunities for self-reflection and struggle for emancipation" (*ibid*, 73). Critical pedagogy includes relationships between teaching and learning since it is particularly concerned with *reconfiguring* the traditional student-teacher relationship, where the teacher is the active agent and the students are the passive recipients. Instead, critical pedagogy heavily endorses students' ability to think critically about their *education situation*. This is also the case within graffiti crews since each member, whether experienced or not, performs both roles (teacher-student, valuates-been valuated) by turns and in the process becomes

²⁷ Greek adolescents who practice graffiti writing have also undertaken this activity as *civic duty*. They have realized that graffiti is not only intended to flagrantly disrespect authority, but to state a specific political message and attract people to a specific political event at a specific time. Thus, the "Self-organization of Expression and Creativity" campaign, that took place repeatedly (Winter 2010-Summer 2011) in the heart of Athens' downtown, the Victoria Square, offers a case in point. The campaign, whose purpose was to combat social exclusion of immigrants and ethnic minorities, included graffiti-based activities to promote anti-racism and interculturalism. As can be seen in that case, the walls act, in effect, as a free press, used to express solidarity for causes and issues both local and global. By challenging accepted prejudices and investing in their neighborhoods urban adolescents are directly involved in social action while at the same time they enhance their capacity to understand and transform these communities. Most of the graffiti writers began tagging in their adolescence for the pleasure of leaving their mark, but through their activities in public space they became politically engaged. Such activities create integral links with social-political arguments. "Critical reflection is a social act of knowing undertaken in a public arena as a form of social and collective empowerment" (McLaren et al., 1995:55).

²⁸ Considering that, it is not surprising that many writers follow successful mainstream careers in disciplines where creativity and collaboration is crucial, such as architecture, graphic design, advertisement and so on.

aware of his or her education status. Additionally, during this perpetual apprenticeship the “student” is being transformed from a passive repository of information to an active agent in the creation of knowledge.

Conclusions: Crew’s potential pedagogical role

Graffiti, paradoxically enough, reproduces dominant hierarchical values but at the same time denies them. On the one hand, graffiti, like most youth subcultural scenes, determines values and structures, behavior and attitude, goals and strategies that are based on the dominant structures and expectations. On the other hand, graffiti is inherently “transgressive” and therefore critically encounters established values and modes of conduct. Although originally organized to support painting, pedagogy has become one of crews’ key elements. Though informal in structure, crews assign special roles to their members. Whether their teaching is beneficial or problematic, they clearly function as educational organizations. Intentionally or not, crew members participate in an educational process which is quite similar to that of schools. By doing so, they absorb many important values and habits since writers learn to seek originality, work hard to improve, manage space as well as time, collaborate with each other in a competitive environment, and so on. All these are key ingredients to build self-confidence and important for success in a mainstream career. Perhaps graffiti’s most significant educational contribution is that, unlike most schools or other cultural institutions, “introduces writers to a critical understanding of power structures and involves them in the construction of alternatives” (Christen, 2003:71). Thereby, writers demonstrate that “social life can be constructed in ways different from the dominant conceptions of reality” (Lachmann, 1988:232). Since these lessons shape the framework of critical pedagogy, we may assume that crews’ members educate each other using this very methodology. In conclusion, since there are potentials in any education, graffiti, by its marginal position and its self-directed learning, should be considered as a valuable and creative alternative.

Author Details

Konstantinos Avramidis is a chartered architect (TEE/TCG) as well as a researcher. He holds a Diploma in Architecture (DipArch, 2007) from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and a postgraduate degree, with distinction, in Interdisciplinary Theory and Design of Space (MSc, 2009) from the National Technical University of Athens, where he has taught as an assistant at architectural design studios. His design work has been awarded, published and exhibited. Konstantinos has also published on themes related to spatial theory and design, emphasising on wall inscription and graffiti. His long association with graffiti culture directs most of his enquiry into contemporary urban visual cultures which are investigated through multimodal formats. kwstas.avramidis@gmail.com

Konstantina Drakopoulou studied Archaeology and Art History at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. She holds a master’s degree in Art History from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and the Freie Universität Berlin, and a PhD from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. She has worked as an art historian for the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Tourism and participated in various research programs at the University of Athens. Konstantina, is currently writing a book about the graffiti scene in Greece. k_drakop@yahoo.com

References

- Austin J., (2001) *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art became an Urban Crisis in New York City*. Columbia University Press, New York.
- Bourriaud N., (2002) *Relational Aesthetics* (trans. Pleasance S., Woods F., Copeland M.). Les presses du réel, Dijon.
- Bruffee, K. A., (1995) *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence and the Authority of Knowledge*. John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.
- Castleman C., (1982) *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York*. MIT Press, Cambridge MA.
- Christen R.S., (2003) "Hip-Hop Learning: Graffiti as an Educator of Urban Teenagers" in *Educational Foundations* 17:4, pp. 57-82.
- Ferrell J., (1996) *Crimes of Style: Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality*. Northeastern University Press, Boston.
- Grody S., (2006), *Graffiti L.A. Street Styles and Art*. Abrams, New York.
- Harris K., (2006) "Graffiti as public pedagogy: The educative potential of street art" in Kincheloe J., Hayes K. (eds.) *Metropedagogy: Power, justice and the urban classroom*. Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, pp. 97-111.
- Lachmann R., (1988) "Graffiti as a career and ideology" in *American Journal of Sociology* 94(2), pp. 229-50.
- Lefebvre H., (1996) *Writings on Cities* (trans.& eds. Kofman E., Lebas E.). Blackwell, Oxford.
- Mailer N., Kurlansky M, Naar J. (ed.), (1974) *The Faith of Graffiti*. Praeger, New York.
- McDonald N., (2001) *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity and Identity in London and New York*. Palgrave, London.
- McLaren P., (2000) *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, and the Pedagogy of Revolution*. Rowman & Littlefield, New York.
- McLaren P., Hammer R., Sholle D. (ed.), (1995) *Rethinking Media Literacy: A Critical Pedagogy of Representation*. P. Lang, New York.
- Maxwell I., (1997) "Hip-Hop Aesthetics and the Will to Culture" in *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 8:2, pp.50-70
- Petchauer E., (2009) "Framing and Reviewing Hip-Hop Educational Research" in *Review of Educational Research*, 79:2, pp.946-978.

Pevsner N., (1940) *Academies of Art, Past and Present*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Phillips S., (1999) *Wallbangin': Graffiti and Gangs in L.A.* University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Rahn J., (2002) *Painting Without Permission: Hip-Hop Graffiti Subculture*. Bergin & Garvey, Westport.

Salaman N., (2008) *Looking back at the life room; revisiting Pevsner's Academies of Art, Past and Present, to reconsider the illustrations and construct photographs representing the curriculum*. PhD Thesis, Goldsmiths College, London.

Stewart J., (1989) *Subway graffiti: An aesthetic study of graffiti on the subway system of New York City, 1970-1978*. PhD Thesis, New York University, New York.

Stewart S., (1987) "Ceci Tuera Cela: Graffiti as Crime and Art" in Fekete J.(ed.), *Life after Postmodernism: Essays on Value and Culture*. St. Martin's Press, New York, pp. 161- 180.